

# VU Research Portal

## **“Hear Israel” The involvement of Jews in education of the deaf (1850-1880)**

Rietveld-van Wingerden, M.; Westerman, W.

### ***published in***

Jewish History  
2009

### ***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1007/s10835-008-9070-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10835-008-9070-y)

### ***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### ***citation for published version (APA)***

Rietveld-van Wingerden, M., & Westerman, W. (2009). “Hear Israel” The involvement of Jews in education of the deaf (1850-1880). *Jewish History*, 23(1), 41-56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10835-008-9070-y>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## **“Hear, Israel”**

### **The involvement of Jews in education of the deaf (1850–1880)**

MARJOKE RIETVELD-VAN WINGERDEN AND WIM WESTERMAN

*Department of Theory and Research in Education, VU-University Amsterdam, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

*E-mail: [M.Rietveld@psy.vu.nl](mailto:M.Rietveld@psy.vu.nl); [WE.Westerman@psy.vu.nl](mailto:WE.Westerman@psy.vu.nl)*

**Abstract** During the last two centuries there has been a methodological struggle over teaching the deaf. Do deaf people learn to communicate by means of gestures and signs (the “manual method”) or is it important for them to learn speech and lip-reading (the “oral method”)? In the second half of the nineteenth century, many schools for the deaf made the transition from the manual to the oral method, which the Milan conference of teachers of the deaf decided to promote in 1880. In this conversion, Jews played an important role. Yet there appears to be a clear link between their efforts and Jewish tradition, including its perception of the deaf.

## **Introduction**

Jewish teachers have played a dominant role in the special education of the deaf. These teachers were also strong defenders of what is known as “the oral method” of deaf-instruction. Why, we would like to ask, were so many Jews eager to take on the role of teaching the deaf to speak and why in just this way? Moreover, what role, if any, does Jewish tradition have in this story? We believe that role exists.

\*\*\*

Deafness is a handicap in the field of communication disorders. If a child cannot hear, he or she does not develop adequate speech, which is based on the imitation of sounds. This is especially true when a child is deaf from birth or has become deaf during early infancy. When discussing the history of educating the deaf, we are speaking about this type of child, who will remain mute without intensive speech training. Thus, until well into the twentieth century, the deaf were called deaf-mutes, even if they had learned to speak. Besides, even if a deaf person succeeds in mastering speech, his or her speech will often be slurred compared to that of the unimpaired. Not surprisingly, there has been a struggle about the preferred educational method for teaching the deaf. This debate has continued for over two centuries. Does the deaf child need to learn to speak, which is a long and difficult learning process, or are

---

The authors wish to thank Corrie Tijsseling and Henk Betten, both researchers of Dutch Education of the Deaf, for their helpful comments.

gestures sufficient for communication? Even now, the matter is undecided. In the last decades of the twentieth century many schools for the deaf changed to the sign or manual method; previously, and for more than a century, the speaking or oral method had been dominant.<sup>1</sup>

## Early teachers of the deaf

Until modern times, the deaf were outcasts. In some places, they were even excluded from inheritance, primarily because of their inadequate speech, which was considered necessary for cognition, religious expression, and the individual's social autonomy. At times, the deaf were also excluded from receiving Communion in church.<sup>2</sup> And Jewish law considered deaf-mutes mentally incompetent, who could not be held responsible for their actions and lacked the requisite intelligence for performing ritual and (certain) civil acts. Inability to communicate was linked to stunted intellectual development, which resulted in the deaf being treated legally as a minor and a ward.<sup>3</sup> But some people doubted these impediments. Leonardo da Vinci, about 1499, reported deaf people who had learned to communicate by means of lip reading, and in his *De Inventionem Dialecticam* (1521), the humanist Rudolph Agricola spoke of the deaf who read and wrote. The deaf Spanish painter known as El Mudo, "the mute one" (born between 1526 and 1532) achieved international fame.<sup>4</sup>

Attitudes were also changing in ecclesiastical circles. The Dutch minister Anthonius Deusing, in his *De surdis ab ortu mutisque ac illorum cognitione* (1656), defended the equality of the deaf and argued that they should be allowed to receive Communion. Some years later, George Sibscota translated this work into English: *The deaf and dumb man's discourse, or a treatise concerning those that are born deaf and dumb, containing a discovery of their knowledge or understanding* (1670). Deusing claimed that deafness had nothing to do with idiocy and, therefore, the deaf should be accepted as full members of the Church.

In the meantime, several teachers of the deaf had achieved a certain fame. Pedro Ponce de Leon (1520–1584) taught children from wealthy families in the monastery of San Salvador in Madrid in order to help them to acquire the ability to speak, which, in turn, enabled them to claim inheritances and manage their own affairs.<sup>5</sup> De Leon's fellow countryman Juan Pablo Bonet (1579–1633) elaborated on the former's method by working out an early finger alphabet, in which positions of the hand corresponded to letters of the alphabet. Bonet was involved in an enterprise that supervised much of the effort that was then going into educating deaf sons of the wealthy, once again,

with the aim of making them into “legitimate” heirs through the acquisition of speech.

Bonet was followed by others who sought to “cure” deafness, and muteness via lip-reading and speech training. They included John Bulwer and John Wallis in England, the Flemish Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont, Johan Conrad Amman in the Netherlands, and Rodrigues Pereire in France. Most, however, kept their methods to themselves and held back from setting them down on writing.<sup>6</sup> Wolff explains this silence by saying the methods were trade secrets which had to be concealed to ensure the teacher’s livelihood.<sup>7</sup> The silence was broken by Amman (1669–1724), a Swiss physician and family doctor living in Amsterdam, who, in 1687, was asked by a wealthy businessman to teach his deaf daughter. He recorded his experiences in two books, *Surdus Loquens* (1692) and *Dissertatio Loquela* (1700), which were translated into many languages; in English, for example, as *The Talking Deaf Man* (1694) and *Dissertation on Speech* (1700). The books describe the mechanism of speech, the nature of sounds, the shape of the mouth while producing sounds, and advised teaching aids like the mirror, finger spelling, and feeling vibrations of the head, throat, and tongue during speech. Both books served as teaching guides until well into the nineteenth century in many countries, not least because of their extensive descriptions. Amman is considered the founding father of the oral method.<sup>8</sup>

Closer to our immediate interest was the Christian Kabbalist Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont (1614–1699). Van Helmont viewed the voice as the breath or spirit of life, controlled and articulated by our inmost soul, the “central spirit,” and located in the heart. The philosophical study of language, he believed, would uncover great truths. Indeed, van Helmont linked speech and spirit as the constituting force of human beings, but he also studied speech movements and vocality. And these he related to Hebrew characters, which, he said, were a replica of the vocal organs that produced corresponding sounds. The replication was so complete that he was persuaded that the deaf would understand Hebrew characters immediately, for, after all, was not Hebrew the language used by God when he created the Earth? Van Helmont also claimed he had been able to teach a deaf-mute person to speak and answer in only three-weeks.<sup>9</sup> His book, *Alphabeti vere naturalis Hebraica brevissima delineation, A Brief Description of the Actual, Natural Hebrew Alphabet*, contained pictures of Hebrew characters that were accompanied by drawing of speech positions. Although the idea of Hebrew as the innate language of all people was not new, its application to the deaf was an innovation.<sup>10</sup>

The first Jewish teacher of the deaf known to us was Jacob Rodrigues Pereire (1715–1780), a descendant of Portuguese *conversos*, who fled to Bordeaux in France at the age of eighteen to avoid the Inquisition. In 1747, he took up residence in Paris, where returned openly to Judaism.<sup>11</sup> Pereire also

specialized in teaching deaf pupils, both children and adults, to speak, which, he said, he accomplished within no more than a few weeks. In the initial phase of teaching, Pereire used mimetic signs, but as soon as a pupil could read lips, gestures were excluded and replaced by devices like finger spelling. His pupils learned to read, write, and speak, although lip reading was not part of the programme. To show off his achievements, he took a promising student to the French Royal Academy of Sciences in 1749, and in 1750, Pereire presented this student at the royal court in Versailles. The visit was so successful that the king awarded Pereire an annual pension of 800 *livres* so that he might continue his work. Pereire's position as a Jew was delicate, and as a safeguard he used to send Christian pupils to a priest for lessons in the catechism. Pereire also kept his method secret, lest others copy it and cost him his livelihood. We know only as much about the specifics of his method as can be teased out of utterances by pupils and from the correspondence Pereire carried on with the promoter of the "manual method," C.M. de L'Épée (1712–1789), in which Pereire defended the "oral method."<sup>12</sup>

### Methodological controversy

The correspondence between Pereire and de L'Épée marked the start of debate about which was the better method for teaching the deaf.<sup>13</sup> Oralists were eager to teach a deaf child to speak, while manualists preferred sign language, which they said developed powers of cognition and social competence. At this time, education of the deaf lost also some of its previously elitist quality. Whereas previously, the pupils invariably came from wealthy families, now they were sometimes the beneficiaries of donors and resident in special institutes.<sup>14</sup> What was perhaps the world's first boarding school for deaf children was opened in Paris, in 1760, by C.M. de L'Épée. Unlike his predecessors, he rejected teaching the deaf to speak and to "hear with their eyes." In his opinion, gestures were the mother tongue of the deaf and that was what should be used in educating them. He developed a sign system consisting of the natural gestures the deaf already used, supplemented with artificial ones to represent grammatical rules such as the conjugation of verbs and the declension of nouns. One advantage was that sign language was more appropriate for teaching larger groups of learners together. Moreover, de L'Épée argued that the articulation, or oral, method required too much energy and time at the cost of acquiring basic knowledge. At his school, the main subjects were writing, reading and arithmetic; some pupils learned German and Latin as well. For communication with the hearing, who mostly did not understand sign language, the deaf were to write, using paper and pencil or a slate.

This Parisian school served as a model for schools elsewhere. Unlike his contemporaries, Pereire and the German oralist Samuel Heinicke, who kept their methods secret, de L'Épée was eager to demonstrate his method. Many visitors from abroad came to Paris to observe him. Some stayed for a short period, others for months. Back in their own countries, they propagated the manual method. Between 1760 and 1820, most European countries and the United States imitated the Parisian institute for the deaf, with similar institutions founded in Berlin, Bordeaux, Geneva, Ghent, Groningen, Madrid, Rome, Schleswig and Vienna.<sup>15</sup>

However, in Germany, Samuel Heinicke continued the oral tradition, establishing an institute for the deaf in Leipzig, in 1778, which was imitated by other German boarding schools. Heinicke used and elaborated Amman's (and effectively Periere's) method—but even more restrictively, not allowing finger spelling or sign language even in leisure time—although he did correspond with de L'Épée. Heinicke characterized his approach as “social,” since deaf people who were trained with the oral method could communicate with non-deaf persons who lacked, nor were they ever likely to learn, sign language.<sup>16</sup> Heinicke's work soon became known as the German method, de L'Épée's the French,<sup>17</sup> and it was the former that was winning the day. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the oral method was that most commonly used. A combined system was also introduced: sign language as the method, but speech as the educational aim.

The fashion was indeed changing. The turning point was the establishment of the Rotterdam school for the deaf, in 1853,<sup>18</sup> whose work would serve as an example for schools elsewhere and whose head, David Hirsch, would help schools in other countries convert from the manual to the oral method, for instance, at the Jewish Deaf and Dumb Home in London.

The Jewish link was not accidental, although like other Dutch schools at this time in which Jews were involved, the explicit orientation of the Rotterdam school was not Jewish. Stimulated in part by new legislation, but also by the conviction that being educated in isolation was socially harmful, between 1857 and 1861 Dutch Jews had closed their nearly sixty Jewish primary schools.<sup>19</sup> It was only to be expected that pluralism would also be the watchword at the Rotterdam school, where both the teaching staff and pupils originated from various religious backgrounds.

### **The Rotterdam school in the Netherlands**

When the Rotterdam school first opened, it had to compete with two other Dutch schools for the deaf, both of which were using the manual or the combined manual/oral method. One of these schools, that in Groningen in the

North-East, was founded by Henry Daniel Guyot in 1790 after he had spent several months at De L'Épée's institute in Paris. The second school was Roman Catholic, and in the south, founded in 1840. Both schools received grants from national, provincial, and municipal governments, supplemented with contributions from subscribers and churches, which enabled them to admit children of the poor for free. In 1853, the Groningen school had 150 pupils, the Roman Catholic school about 80.

The founding of the Rotterdam school in the western part of the country was more than a matter of geographical distribution. Its founders were strongly convinced of the superiority of the oral method. One of them was the Jewish surgeon Machiel Polano (1813–1878), who was named a professor at Leiden in 1869. Polano had seven children, of whom two were deaf; Eduard and Marianne, born in 1840 and 1846, respectively. Polano was an advocate of the oral method like his friend and colleague, the ear doctor, Alexander Symons, who was also Jewish. Symons often advised parents about rearing their deaf children, telling them to speak to them from the very beginning and to utilise every small sound that came from the child's lips. From 1844, Symons defended his preference for the oral method in various Dutch journals, medical and otherwise.<sup>20</sup> When Eduard Polano was ready to begin formal education in 1847, at the age of six, his father, persuaded by Symons's arguments against the manual method, refused to send him to the Groningen school. Instead, Polano discovered David Hirsch (1813–1895),<sup>21</sup> who had been the principal of a school for the deaf in Aachen since 1838, and who was keen to advance the oral method in The Netherlands, England, and Belgium.<sup>22</sup>

Hirsch was born in Müntz, a small village with a high proportion of Jews. Hirsch was physically handicapped, and for a short period he was the teacher of the children of the local Jewish community. Two of the boys were deaf. In 1831 Hirsch, started to work as their personal tutor, and within a year, the boys were speaking clearly, and they understood, and even answered, simple spoken questions, as well as they had mastered reading, writing, and arithmetic. This led to Hirsch's selection in 1836 as an excellent candidate to teach in a new school for the deaf. After additional training in various specialized institutes, Hirsch became the principal of the Aachen school, in 1838,<sup>23</sup> where he remained until he became the private teacher of Machiel Polano's young son, Eduard. Eduard was followed by others, including Polano's daughter Marianne, in 1850. Classes met at Polano's home. Symons was so enthusiastic about Hirsch's teaching that he introduced it in a lecture to colleagues. A month later, Hirsch, accompanied by his pupils, was invited to demonstrate his educational methods and achievements to this same group of physicians.

In May 1853, a formal school, replete with a board of overseers, was established. There were twenty-one pupils. Every year the population increased

by ten to twenty children; and a new teacher was added. While the Groningen and Roman Catholic institutes commonly had forty pupils per class, classes in the Rotterdam school had only twelve to fourteen, a number more conducive to success with the needed individual approach and intensity the oral method required.

Supporters of the oral method made three arguments in its defense. First, through speech and lip-reading, the deaf might integrate better into the world of those with normal hearing and speech. Indeed, rather than offer boarding facilities, the school placed pupils from outside Rotterdam with foster families to enhance normality; needless to say, families and pupils were matched according to respective religious identities.<sup>24</sup> The second argument was a developmental one. Teaching speech and lip-reading took much more time and energy than the manual method. However, the abilities acquired repaid the investment. Orally taught pupils eventually had more options open to them for leading their lives; they could also more easily continue learning. The third and final argument insisted that speech was a better tool than gestures for shaping cognition and the ability to think abstractly, which was the argument made when the oral method was first proposed.<sup>25</sup>

Hirsch was determined to promote the oral method, especially outside The Netherlands. He and the other teachers from Rotterdam visited schools in Germany, Belgium, England, and, in turn, they hosted visitors from abroad. Hirsch also helped schools in Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, London and Milan to convert from the manual method to the oral one. In addition, teachers from the Rotterdam school were appointed as directors of newly founded schools for the deaf: Van Asch in Manchester (England, 1858) and later in New Zealand, William van Praagh in London (1867) and J.C. van Wielen in Antwerp (1864).<sup>26</sup>

### **The London Deaf and Dumb Home**

In 1865, Juliana Baroness Mayer de Rothschild, donated a large amount of money to establish a Jewish boarding school for the deaf in East London. Initially, the school followed the manual method, like most other English institutes of its kind.<sup>27</sup> However, shortly after the school opened, a pamphlet appeared titled *Sounds versus Signs* defending the oral method, and it referred explicitly to the Rotterdam school, where, as it turns out, the pamphlet's author, Henry Isaacs, had sent his own two deaf children. In the pamphlet, Isaacs explained the oral method by using examples from Dutch. He was most persuasive. The head of the London school's board, Assur H. Moses, soon approached his counterparts in Rotterdam, and Hirsch recommended inviting William van Praagh, also a Jew, who had trained in the Rotterdam



school since 1859, to help the London school convert from the manual to the oral method.

In June 1867, Van Praagh moved from Rotterdam to London to become the director of the London Deaf and Dumb Home. Within one year, English visitors reported positively about this Jewish institution. Two months after Van Praagh's arrival, Anne Isabella Thackeray visited the school and wrote an essay about it, "Out of silence".<sup>28</sup> She interviewed Van Praagh, who told her:

It is an immense thing for the children to feel that they are not cut off hopelessly and markedly from communication with their fellow-creatures; the organs of speech being developed, their lungs are strengthened, their health improves. You can see a change in the very expression of their faces; they delight in using their newly acquired power.<sup>29</sup>

Thackeray responded with praise:

I do not know whether little Jewish boys and girls are on an average cleverer than little Christians, or whether, notwithstanding their infirmity, the care and culture bestowed upon them has borne this extra fruit; but these little creatures were certainly brighter and more lively than any dozen Sunday-school children taken at hazard. Their eyes danced, their faces worked with interest and attention, they seemed to catch light from their master's face, from one another's, from ours as we spoke; their eagerness, their cheerfulness and childish glee, were really remarkable; they laughed to one another much like any other children, peeped over their slates, answered together when they were called up. It was difficult to remember that they were deaf, though, when they spoke, a great slowness, indistinctness, and peculiarity was of course very noticeable. But these are only the pupils of a month or two, be it remembered. A child with all its faculties is nearly two years learning to talk.<sup>30</sup>

The respected medical journal *The Lancet* commented:

Having visited the establishment, and witnessed the progress which the pupils, male and female, have made since June last, when Mr. Van Praagh introduced the system of teaching them to use their voices rather than their fingers to explain their wishes, we can only express our astonishment and satisfaction at the success of his efforts, and hold them up for imitation at other similar establishments.<sup>31</sup>

The news prompted non-Jewish parents, too, to request that their deaf children be admitted. And, in response, Baroness de Rothschild, the most important source of funding for the school, insisted on broadening the rules to allow non-Jewish children in. During a visit in 1868, Hirsch's advice was sought, who suggested introducing an open admission policy. Boarding facilities would be maintained for Jewish students, while foster parents would be provided for the children of non-Jews. Moreover, he advised that persons from other religions be appointed as members of the board and teachers, as the Rotterdam school had already done.

The proposals were accepted, especially after Hirsch told the London board that the Rotterdam school would always be ready to lend a helping hand.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the increasing success of the school moved Baroness Mayer de Rothschild to establish the Association for the Oral Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, whose goal was to urge English institutes for the deaf to use the oral method, to introduce vocational training of teachers, and to open day schools for the deaf. This was in 1871. In July 1872, the first day school for the deaf in England was opened in London, which also served as a training school for aspiring teachers. Van Praagh became director of both the day school and the teacher training institute; he was succeeded as director of the Jewish Deaf and Dumb Home by S. Schöntheil from Vienna. Schöntheil was also Jewish.<sup>33</sup>

### **Deafness in Jewish law and tradition**

Jews clearly were leading the way in the oral education of the deaf. This was partly because the percentage of deaf Jews was high.<sup>34</sup> Jews comprised only one percent of the entire Dutch population in the nineteenth century, yet ten percent of the pupils at the schools for the deaf in Groningen and Rotterdam was Jewish.<sup>35</sup> But even if this high percentage corresponded in some way to the traditional Jewish commitment to educate all children, the question remains why Jews so eagerly supported the oral method. Pereire may have simply been following the trend in his day, but the Rotterdam and London initiatives evolved at a time when the competing manual method was in vogue.

To answer this question, we have to consider the perception of deafness in Jewish legal texts, remembering as well, however, that Jewish education had always had an oral bent. The idea of Oral law remained for centuries literally that, until the Mishnah and Gemarrah were finally set down in writing, and even then, disputes went on for centuries about when that event occurred. Orality was also emphasized by the presence of the parent, especially the father, in all stages of teaching. Of course, orality was a strong feature in

late medieval and Renaissance Christian education, too.<sup>36</sup> Teachers in both Jewish and Christian schools recited the letters of the alphabet aloud, and the boys recited after them; then written letters were introduced. Through recitation, Jewish pupils were also preparing for chanting, whether of the prayers or the Torah.<sup>37</sup> Chanting texts aloud emphasized holiness, but in combination with swaying bodily motions, it was also a mnemonic strategy.<sup>38</sup> Children chanted at festivals and “educational ceremonies” such as the first hair cut, circumcision, and *bar mitzvah*.<sup>39</sup> Maimonides, too, urged requiring children to start learning Torah as soon as they could speak,<sup>40</sup> a view that inspired many, especially Kabbalists, to prefer secret oral transmission of knowledge to writing.<sup>41</sup>

What of the deaf? For centuries, the deaf were seen as educational incompetents. Specifically, it was said that the deaf could not make use of their “innate language,” which was Hebrew. Zvi Marx, who has studied these issues thoroughly, claims this attitude goes back to Talmudic times,<sup>42</sup> and the result was the exclusion of the deaf from all ceremonies requiring oral expression, even up to the nineteenth century. The deaf were also considered incapable of fulfilling *mitzvot*, religious precepts. When, in June 1867, two boys and two girls of Hirsch’s school, one of whom was Louisa Isaacson of London, took part in a ceremony akin to what is usually called Confirmation today, the ensuing debate was inevitable.

In the presence of the boards of Jewish organizations, parents, and other interested persons, the children had displayed their religious knowledge. They had responded orally, and in voices clear enough for all to hear, to questions their teacher A.D. Lutomirsky had posed. They discussed the Ten Commandments and fundamentals of Judaism, and the girls spoke of the duties of Jewish women. The pupils also read and translated prayers. The results, successful beyond all expectations, evoked amazement from all who were there at “the fruits of love and pure religiosity.” The Chief Rabbi J. Isaacsohn, as inspector of religious education, ended the session with a lecture based on Exodus 4: 11: “Who made man’s mouth? Or who makes one mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord.”

Normally, Isaacsohn would have scoffed at ceremonies of this kind, which were highly unconventional attestations of religious commitment. In this special case, however, he considered the exception warranted, although, to be sure, he cautioned that it was to be treated only as an examination of acquired knowledge. It did not take the place of a *bar mitzvah* ceremony or the like. Lutomirsky agreed, but he also called for appreciating the imperfections that heighten our awareness of nature in its wholeness; it sharpens the human spirit, elevates and refines inner life.<sup>43</sup>

Not everyone was of the same opinion. One reader of the *Nieuw Israelitisch Weekblad* (*New Israelite Weekly*) reacted furiously, especially to Isaacson:

“When a boy is called before the Torah, who, nevertheless, will not be accepted as a full member, the *bar mitzvah* is just a show and a mystification. Why should a deaf person be called to the Torah and taught the precepts, if he is considered—in line with the Talmud—incapable of development and understanding and, so, not bound by the *mitzvot*? Why should a teacher like Lutomirsky be paid a salary for something that is not permitted?”<sup>44</sup>

This comment epitomized the problem. Both the Bible and Talmud emphasize the importance of hearing and speech and the legal impediments their absence creates. Hearing is enshrined in the *Shem’a*, whether it is simple hearing, or linked to understanding as well. But one must “answer” God’s voice as well, in public prayer and ritual. Consequently, the Talmud makes no bones about the *heresh*, by which it refers to those who are both deaf and mute: “The *Mishnah* speaks of the deaf-mute as it does of one who is mentally disabled and of the minor: just as one who is mentally impaired and the minor lack understanding (*lav bnei de’a*), so [to call someone a] ‘deaf-mute’ denotes precisely this [mental incompetence].”<sup>45</sup> Speech and intelligence are synonymous.

Nonetheless, as Zwi Marx has shown, halakhic norms concerning people with handicaps such as deafness have their special complexities.<sup>46</sup> To a certain extent, the Talmud makes a distinction between those who hear but cannot speak and those who speak but cannot hear. As opposed to those who are *both* deaf and mute, these people are legally competent. Yet these people occupy a theoretical category only, since it was assumed that neither of the two (exceptional) categories existed in fact. In real life, the deaf were mute and the mute deaf. As put succinctly by Maimonides, the deaf lacked the cognitive faculty and human dignity connected with speech.<sup>47</sup>

The oral method and its successes challenged this interpretative tradition. In fact, the success of the method reinforced the rabbinic view that speech affirms intelligence. Hirsch and Symons thus spoke of “giving these children back to society,” “speech as the breath of the soul,” and “speech as the translation of cognition.”<sup>48</sup> At the same time, they hesitated to go so far as to petition the Jewish communities where their schools were located to recognize their pupils as halakhically competent.

It would only be in the second half of the nineteenth century that opinion began to change, although slowly. Those like R. Hayyim Halberstam (ca. 1870) defended the older posture, claiming that speech without hearing was empirically impossible. Others said that the uttered speech of the deaf was too imperfect. Yet in response Shlomoh Drimmer (1893) argued that the deaf could overcome their muteness through education in articulation.<sup>49</sup> And a fortunate visit of none other than Rabbi Abraham Samuel Benjamin Sofer,

popularly known as *Hatam Sofer*, to the Vienna school for the deaf in the 1870s, contributed significantly to bringing about revision.

Sofer was so amazed at the students' capacities and speech that he requested the school to provide the Jewish pupils with phylacteries (*tefilin*), so they could participate in prayers. Indeed, he recommended their full halakhic acceptance.<sup>50</sup> Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer (1886), too, reconsidered the traditional classification of the *heresh*, recognizing that the speaking deaf were in full possession of mental capacities. This position was reaffirmed a third time in the 1880s by Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg: Rabbi , especially with reference to those who had learned to speak in the modern schools for the deaf.<sup>51</sup> These three did not remain alone.

## Conclusion

Nineteenth century Jewish defenders of the oral method may well have been hoping for change in all matters pertaining to the deaf, including the reversal of their long-standing halakhic exclusion. They had certainly disassociated themselves from past interpretations of the deaf as persons with low mental capacities. As they saw it, and as even somebody as noted as the Hatam Sofer did, too, the acquisition of speech reflected these abilities' existence, if did not also increase them.<sup>52</sup> Of course, prompting this attitude was the success of the oral method itself, which was the ultimate "proof of the pudding." The many revisions in (especially Dutch) Jewish life that had followed emancipation may have also played a role; the lot of the deaf, like that of all Dutch Jews, should be improved.<sup>53</sup> But perhaps the most potent factor of all, supplying the greatest impetus, was a will to bring even those hitherto considered irreparably handicapped back into the circle of the orality that had so regularly featured in Jewish ritual and life and, of course, continued to do so. Surely it was more than coincidence that the initiators of education in the oral method were Jews.

In 1880 the Milan conference of teachers of the deaf decided that the oral method is preferable over the manual method:

"The Convention, considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signs, for restoring deaf-mutes to social life, and for giving them greater facility of language, declares that the method of articulation should have the preference over that of signs in instruction in education of the deaf and dumb."<sup>54</sup>

The Rotterdam school for the deaf had played an important role in bringing about this change. The declaration of the Milan conference was testimony that the impact of the school had reached far from home, to Italy, Belgium,

and England, where it had also sent teachers. It was a great accolade for Hirsch that the chairman of the third international conference of deaf teachers, held in Brussels, mentioned his school as a model for teacher training.<sup>55</sup> Yet was this not also indirect recognition of Jewish traditions of orality and their persistence? We think it was.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

## Notes

1. R.E. Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness. A History of the Long Struggle to Make Possible Normal Living to Those Handicapped by Lack of Normal Hearing* (Cleveland/London, 1970), pp. 130–168. A. Tellings, *The Two Hundred Years' War in Deaf Education. A Reconstruction of the Methods Controversy* (Nijmegen, 1995), pp. 97–99; M. Rietveld-van Wingerden, "Educating the Deaf in the Netherlands: a Historical Methodological Controversy in Historical Perspective," *History of Education* 32 (2003), pp. 401–416. It is important to note that today, most countries have standardized their own sign languages and corresponding dictionaries.
2. P.L. Safford and E.J. Safford, *A History of Childhood and Disability* (New York, 1996), pp. 6–7; M.J.C. Büchli, *De Zorg voor de Doofstomme* [The care for the deaf and dumb] (Amsterdam, 1948), pp. 14–19; Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness*, pp. 20–24.
3. J.D. Bleich, "Current Responsa, Decisions of Bate Din and Rabbinical Literature. Status of the Deaf-Mute in Jewish Law," *The Jewish Law Annual* 2 (1979), pp. 187–194.
4. Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness*, pp. 31–34.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
6. H. Lane, *When the Mind Hears. A History of the Deaf* (New York, 1984), pp. 67–94; Safford and Safford, *A History of Childhood and Disability*, pp. 28–38.
7. J.G. Wolff, *Language, Brain and Hearing. An Introduction to the Psychology of Language with a section on Deaf Children's Learning of Language* (London, 1979), p. 156.
8. J. Rée, *I See a Voice. A Philosophical History* (London, 1999), pp. 62–68; Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, pp. 100–103; Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness*, pp. 65–71; Safford and Safford, *A History of Childhood and Disability*, p. 33.
9. Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, p. 69; Rée, *I See a Voice*, pp. 3, 61, 76–77; Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness*, p. 58; Büchli, *De Zorg voor de Doofstomme*, p. 31.
10. Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) wanted to find out what kind of speech children would have when they grew up if nobody ever spoke to them. He bade the foster mothers to treat their children very well, but in no way to prattle with them, or to speak to them. He expected that the children would start to speak the oldest language: Hebrew, instead of Greek, Latin, Arabic, or perhaps the language of their parents, of whom they had been born, see P.H. Mussen, J.J. Conger and J. Kagan, *Child Development and Personality* (New York, 1965, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), p. 162.
11. E. La Rochelle, *Jacob Rodrigues Pereire. Premier Instituteur des Sourds-Muets en France; sa Vie et ses Travaux* (Paris, 1882), pp. 3–18, 119–126, 142–150.
12. Rée, *I See a Voice*, pp. 141–144; Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, pp. 71–86; La Rochelle, *Jacob Rodrigues Pereire*, *passim*.

13. Wolff, *Language, Brain and Hearing*, p. 158.
14. Tellings, *A Two Hundred Years' War*, pp. 6–8, 53–55; Rietveld-van Wingerden, "Educating the Deaf," p. 406; W.W. Taylor and I. Wagner-Taylor, *Special Education of Physically Handicapped Children in Western Europe* (New York, 1960), p. 19.
15. Rietveld-van Wingerden, "Educating the deaf," pp. 403–406; Tellings, *A Two Hundred Years' War*, pp. 38–39; Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, p. 64.
16. H. Hanselmann, *Einführung in die Heilpädagogik. Praktischer Teil* (Erlenbach-Zürich, 1933, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), p. 72.
17. Rée, *I See a Voice*, pp. 162–165; Safford and Safford, *A History of Childhood and Disability*, p. 34; Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, pp. 100–105.
18. Rietveld-van Wingerden, "Educating the Deaf".
19. Between 1857 and 1861, after the Education Act of 1857 ended governmental subsidies to denominational Jewish primary schools, the more than sixty Jewish schools, except two, stopped providing general primary education. They changed into religious schools for learning Hebrew, Torah, Talmud and rituals, attended by pupils in their leisure time (afternoons, Saturdays and Sundays). This was not just a matter of money but also of principle. The increasingly powerful liberal wing criticised the low quality of Jewish schools and tried to persuade the Jews that public schools would stimulate their integration into society. In this transition period the Rotterdam school of the deaf took its stance: providing general education to deaf children, regardless of their religious background. However, Jewish pupils received additional Jewish lessons from a teacher appointed to that job: See M. Rietveld-van Wingerden and S. Miedema, "Freedom of Education and Dutch Jewish Schools in the Mid-Nineteenth century," *Jewish History*, 17 (2003), pp. 31–54.
20. M. Rietveld-van Wingerden, "De sprekende dove. Dovenonderwijs in Rotterdam in de negentiende eeuw," in H. Amsing, N. Bakker, P. Schreuder, G. Timmerman and J.J.H. Dekker, eds., *Over pedagogische kwaliteit. Historische en Theoretische Perspectieven op Goed Onderwijs en Goede Opvoeding* (Groningen, 2007), pp. 54–64.
21. D. Hirsch, *L'Enseignement des Sourds-Muets d'après la Méthode Allemande introduit en Belgique. Souvenirs d'une Visite faite aux Ecoles des Sourds-Muets, à Anvers, Bruxelles, Gand et Bruges* (Rotterdam, 1868), p. 18; A. Böseneker, *Zur Geschichte der Taubstummenschule in Aachen bis zu ihrer Zerstörung im Jahre 1944* (Herzogenrath, 1990), p. 50.
22. Böseneker, *Zur Geschichte der Taubstummenschule in Aachen*, pp. 39, 51–52, suggests Aachen was not a hospitable city for Jews, giving impetus to Hirsch's will to leave.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–46.
24. Rietveld-van Wingerden, "De Sprekende Dove," pp. 58–59.
25. Rietveld-van Wingerden, "Educating the Deaf," pp. 413–415.
26. Annual Reports of the Rotterdam School for Deaf-Mutes (*Verslag omtrent de Inrichting voor Doofstommen-Onderwijs te Rotterdam*) 1855–1856, p. 39; 1865–1866, p. 22; A.B. Allen, *They Hear with the Eye. A Centennial History of the Sumner School for Deaf Children* (Wellington, New Zealand, 1980), pp. 7–34; C. van Asch, *Gerrit van Asch. Pioneer of Oral Education of the Deaf* (Christchurch, New Zealand, 1989), pp. 5–19; Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness*, pp. 144–145; Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, pp. 384–385; Hirsch, *L'Enseignement des Sourds-Muets*.
27. An exception being the earlier mentioned Van Asch's school in Birmingham, see P.H. Butterfield, "The First Training Colleges for Teachers of the Deaf," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 19 (1971), pp. 51–69; Bender, *The Conquest of Deafness*, pp. 144–145.
28. A.I. Thackeray, "Out of Silence," *The Cornhill Magazine*, 16 (1868), part 1, pp. 573–577.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 575.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 575–576.

31. *The Lancet*, 22 February 1868.
32. D. Hirsch, *Verslag van een Bezoek aan Londen, Uitgebragt in de Vergadering van het Bestuur der Inrigting voor Doofstommen-Onderwijs te Rotterdam* (Rotterdam, 1868), pp. 54–55.
33. P.J. Fehmers, *Mededeelingen Betreffende het Doofstommen-Onderwijs in Engeland* (Rotterdam, 1890), pp. 13–15; Butterfeld, “The First Training Colleges,” pp. 51–66.
34. W.M. Feldman, *The Jewish child. Its history, folklore, biology and sociology* (London, 1917), pp. 393–397.
35. See the annual reports of both institutes: *Algemeen verslag gedaan te Groningen in de jaarlijksche vergadering van contribuerende leden* (Groningen, 1855–1880), passim.; *Verslag omtrent de Inrichting voor Doofstommen-Onderwijs te Rotterdam* (Rotterdam, 1855–1880), passim. The high percentage of Jewish students cannot be declared by for example family policy. Jewish parents were not more inclined to send their children to school than non-Jews, because Jews largely belonged to the lowest classes in society, where school absenteeism was high (M.H. Gans, *Memorboek. Platenatlas van het leven der joden in Nederland van de middeleeuwen tot 1940* (Baarn, 1971), pp. 331–332).
36. P.F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy. Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore, 1989), pp. 339–340; B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1983), pp. 4–5.
37. I.G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood. Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven CT, 1996), pp. 27–32.
38. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, p. 72.
39. H.E. Goldberg, *Jewish Passages. Cycles of Jewish Life* (Berkeley CA, 2003), pp. 87–91; T.C.R. Marx, *Halakha and Handicap. Jewish Law and Ethics on Disability* (Jerusalem/Amsterdam, 1993), pp. 414, 523. G. Appel, *A Philosophy of Mizvot. The Religious-Ethical Concepts of Judaism. Their Roots in Biblical Law and Oral Tradition* (New York, 1975), pp. 67–72.
40. “When should a father commence his son’s instruction in Torah? As soon as a child begins to talk,” cited in I.B.H. Abram, *Jewish Tradition as Permanent Education* (The Hague, 1986), p. 3. Abram cited from M. Hyason’s translation of Maimonides, *Misneh Torah. The Book of Knowledge* (Jerusalem, 1965), 1: 6.
41. E.R. Wolfson, “Orality, Textuality, and Revelation as Modes of Education and Formation in Jewish Mystical Circles of the High Middle Ages,” in J. van Engen, eds., *Educating People of Faith. Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids MI, 2004), pp. 178–207, 184–185.
42. Marx, *Halakha and Handicap*, p. 523.
43. *Weekblad voor Israelieten*, 28 June 1867; *Nieuw Israëlitisch Weekblad*, 18 June 1867.
44. *Nieuw Israelitisch Weekblad*, 25 December 1868.
45. *Mishna Hagiga* 1:1 cited by T.C. Marx, *Disability in Jewish Law* (London/New York, 1992), p. 114.
46. Marx, *Halakha and Handicap*, p. 6.
47. Marx, *Halakha and Handicap*, pp. 412–413, 472–473; D.M. Feldman, “Deafness and Jewish Law and Tradition,” in J.D. Schein and L.J. Waldman, eds., *The Deaf Jew in the Modern World* (New York, 1986) pp. 12–23.
48. Rietveld-van Wingerden, “De Sprekende Dove,” p. 56.
49. Bleich, “Current Responsa,” p. 188.
50. Bleich, “Current Responsa,” pp. 189–190; Feldman, “Deafness and Jewish Law and Tradition,” pp. 16–18.
51. Marx, *Disability in Jewish Law*, pp. 125–126.



52. See also Feldman, "Deafness and Jewish Law and Tradition," pp. 14–16.
53. R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, "Moeizame aanpassing (1814–1870)," in J.C. Blom, R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld and I. Schöffer, eds., *Geschiedenis van de Joden in Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1995), pp. 207–246: 213–215; B.Wallet, *Nieuwe Nederlanders. De integratie van joden in Nederland (1814-1851)* (Amsterdam, 2007), pp. 137–141; Rietveld-van Wingerden and Miedema, "Freedom of Education and Dutch Jewish Schools," pp. 45–48; B. Wallet, "'End of the Jargon-Scandal'—The Decline and Fall of Yiddish in the Netherlands (1796–1886)," *Jewish History*, 20 (2006), pp. 334–348.
54. R.G. Brill, *International Congresses on Education of the Deaf. An Analytical History 1878–1980* (Washington DC: Gallaudet College Press, 1984), p. 20.
55. D. Hirsch, *Le Troisième Congrès Internationale pour l'Amélioration du Sort des Sourds-Muets, Tenu à Bruxelles* (Rotterdam, 1884), p. 18.